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The Associated Press

ACLU Seeking FBI Files on Activist Probes

By Curt Anderson

December 2, 2004

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ACLU Seeking FBI Files on Activist Probes

By Curt Anderson

December 2, 2004

WASHINGTON - The American Civil Liberties Union is seeking information from the FBI on why bureau task forces set up to combat terrorism also looked into anti-war, animal rights and environmental groups.

Dozens of organizations have been subjected to scrutiny, according to the ACLU, which was filing Freedom of Information Act requests with the FBI on Thursday to try to find out why.

"We think it's clear that the public is interested in the possible return of FBI spying on political and religious groups," said Ann Beeson, the ACLU's associate legal counsel.

The FBI denies singling out individuals or groups for surveillance or investigation based solely on activities protected by the Constitution's guarantees of free speech.

Officials say agents adhere strictly to Justice Department guidelines requiring evidence of criminal activity or indications that a person may know something about a crime.

"Any investigation conducted by the FBI is done under the attorney general's guidelines and in full compliance with the guidelines," FBI spokesman Bill Carter said.

There are terrorism task forces in 100 cities and with more than 3,700 members, including at least 2,000 FBI agents, state and local police, and other federal law enforcement officials. More than half of the task forces were formed after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The ACLU was seeking FBI files on a broad range of individuals and groups that have been interviewed, investigated or subjected to searches by the task forces. The requests also seek information on how the task forces are funded, to determine if they are rewarded with government money by labeling high numbers of cases as related to terrorism, Beeson said.

"What we're afraid is happening is that these cities and towns can get federal anti-terrorism money by identifying local groups as threats in their areas," Beeson said.

The ACLU provided a list of examples, including the Quaker-affiliated American Friends Service Committee that had been monitored by Denver police and was listed as an "active case" by a local terrorism task force.

Others who contend they were improperly monitored or investigated include Rocky Mountain Animal Defense, the Washington-based Campaign for Labor Rights and a number of peace and environmental activists.

The information requests were being filed with FBI headquarters in Washington as well as field offices in Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Oregon, New York, Virginia and Massachusetts, Beeson said. ACLU affiliates in California and New Jersey have previously filed lawsuits seeking similar information.

If the FBI declines to turn over the information, the ACLU can sue in federal court.



Anti-terrorism methods draw ACLU scrutiny

By Kevin Johnson

December 2, 2004

The ACLU wants access to law enforcement files that it believes will shed light on how government anti-terrorism task forces have been monitoring human rights groups and individuals.

In federal Freedom of Information Act requests, the American Civil Liberties Union is asking for reports on "surveillance, questioning and interrogation" of people named in intelligence files kept by terrorism task forces scattered across 10 states. The bulk of the requests have been made in the past two months in several states, including California, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona.

The civil rights organization has been suspicious of the federally managed anti-terrorism units' activities since their dramatic expansion in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Investigators from federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have banded together to form the anti-terrorism groups, which have grown in number from 34 in 2001 to 100 in 2004. Attorney General John Ashcroft authorized the rapid expansion in order to unify police agencies against the threat of terrorism.

The ACLU says it has received dozens of reports from people complaining that they had been approached by the FBI because of their affiliation with activist organizations or because of their travel to the Middle East, said Ann Beeson, the ACLU's associate legal director.

In one request directed to 22 law enforcement agencies in 47 California counties, the ACLU claims that numerous people throughout Northern California have been "interrogated by the FBI for no apparent reason other than having been born in or traveled to the Middle East."

"These random interviews or interrogations raise the concern that the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Task Forces operating in Northern California are infringing upon the civil rights and civil liberties of immigrants, U.S. citizens and organizations by interrogating them without any valid basis," the request states.

The FBI declined to comment on the ACLU's claims.

Last year, the civil rights organization raised questions about instruction the FBI was providing to police in various cities where anti-war and other demonstrations were planned in advance of the Iraq invasion.

Last month, the group also raised concerns about the assignment of dozens of CIA case officers and analysts to assist anti-terrorism task forces in the USA.

The CIA is prohibited by law from participating in intelligence gathering operations against U.S. citizens. Intelligence and FBI officials have said the CIA officers are operating only as advisers and are not involved in criminal investigations.

The Washington Post

Coalition Seeks FBI's Files on Protest Groups

By Dan Eggen

December 3, 2004; Page A03

The American Civil Liberties Union joined with dozens of activist groups yesterday in demanding information about federal counterterrorism surveillance efforts, alleging that the FBI and local police departments have targeted peaceful protest groups and law-abiding citizens for scrutiny based on their political beliefs.

In Freedom of Information Act requests filed in the District and 10 states, the ACLU and its affiliates are seeking FBI files about groups and individuals allegedly under surveillance. They are also asking for details about the operations of Joint Terrorism Task Forces, which include federal and local law enforcement officers and which coordinate counterterrorism probes regionally.

The ACLU points to several incidents over the past year involving antiwar protesters, environmental groups and religious organizations that have raised questions about the scope of counterterrorism investigations. The organization argues that the evidence suggests a pattern of broader harassment of left-leaning groups.

"We aren't trying to say that they can't and don't need to investigate people who happen to be members of political or religious groups when they have concrete evidence of criminality," said ACLU Associate Legal Director Ann Beeson. "But we have evidence that they are targeting these groups with nothing at all. . . . They shouldn't be wasting their time or our money infiltrating peace groups or collecting files on the Quakers or the Catholic Peace Ministries."

An FBI official, who would discuss details of counterterrorism cases only on the condition of anonymity, said some of the incidents highlighted by the ACLU did not involve the FBI. In other cases, the FBI was investigating legitimate potential threats connected to the national political conventions or other events, the official said.

"They've drawn their conclusion before they've done their research," the FBI official said. "All of our cases are predicated on allegations of criminal activity or national security issues. . . . If there is a threat involved, we have to look at it."

The debate is the latest in a series of disputes over the aggressive counterterrorism tactics used by federal authorities since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which prompted a restructuring of the FBI to focus on thwarting future terrorist strikes and ushered in legislation that strengthened the Justice Department's ability to conduct secret searches and surveillance.

The ACLU and other groups have been particularly critical of an FBI "intelligence bulletin" issued in October 2003 that urged local police to monitor antiwar protests and to "report any potentially illegal acts to the nearest FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force."

The ACLU also highlighted several specific cases across the country that have previously drawn condemnation from activist groups. They include subpoenas issued, and then withdrawn, in Des Moines in connection with an antiwar protest; a series of interviews conducted by federal and local authorities in connection with alleged threats on media organizations at the Democratic National Convention in Boston; and the discovery by peace activists in Fresno, Calif., that their group had been infiltrated by a member of the local sheriff's department.

Several cases have revolved around groups in Colorado, where the Denver Police Department agreed in a legal settlement last year to stop keeping "spy files" on protesters. The ACLU says some of those files were shared with the local JTTF and the FBI.

"The FBI has a history of being heavy-handed," said David Crawford, executive director of Rocky Mountain Animal Defense of Boulder, an organization whose name was among those shared with the federal terrorism task force because the Denver police had labeled it a "criminal extremist" group. "People are concerned that their name is going to end up on a list somewhere, all because they are participating in peaceful activities and exercising their free-speech rights."



ACLU wants to know who's in FBI 'spy files'

By Frank Main

December 2, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois is asking the FBI to reveal whether agents are keeping "spy files" on Islamic groups and anti-war protesters in the Chicago area.

The requests are being made under the Freedom of Information Act -- part of a national effort by the ACLU to obtain FBI surveillance files on the groups and their leaders.

Chicago Police officers infiltrated five protest groups in 2002. The investigations came after a court ruling expanded the department's intelligence-gathering powers.

Undercover officers were assigned to attend meetings, rallies and fund-raisers of the American Friends Service Committee and four other anti-war groups. Police targeted the groups because protesters were threatening to disrupt the Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue, a meeting of international business leaders held in Chicago in 2002.

Local groups

The American Friends Service Committee, founded by the Quakers in 1917, now wants to know if Chicago Police turned over their surveillance to the FBI and if the spying is continuing.

Law enforcement authorities have spied on the American Friends Service Committee since the 1950s when an FBI file in Chicago identified one of the group's leaders, Clarence Pickett, as a "communist sympathizer," said Michael McConnell, regional director of the American Friends Service Committee.

The American Friends Service Committee was one of the groups that won a court order in 1982 barring the Chicago Police "Red Squad" from spying on suspected terrorist and hate groups.

But in 2001, the federal appeals court lifted the ban, saying it "rendered the police helpless to do anything to protect the public." The Police Department must keep records of the intelligence-gathering under the court's ruling.

A Chicago Police spokesman did not respond to a question about whether the department turns over such surveillance files to the FBI here. The FBI says it does not monitor

groups or interview individuals unless it receives intelligence they may be plotting violent or disruptive criminal activity -- or have knowledge of such activity.

The other groups asking the FBI to turn over any surveillance files include the Community Renewal Society; the Council on American Islamic Relations of Chicago; the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago; the Fellowship of Reconciliation Chicago; the Muslim Bar Association; the Muslim Civil Rights Center, and the Oak Park Coalition for Peace and Justice.



ACLU Says FBI Spying on Religious, Protest Groups

December 2, 2004

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The American Civil Liberties Union on Thursday accused the FBI and local police of spying on political and faith-based groups and formally asked the government for information about such FBI surveillance.

In Freedom of Information Act requests filed in 10 states and Washington, D.C., the ACLU sought information about the FBI's use of Joint Terrorism Task Forces and local police for what it called political surveillance.

It pointed to some documented examples of task forces' involvement in the investigation of environmental activists and anti-war protesters.

"The FBI is wasting its time and our tax dollars spying on groups that criticize the government, like the Quakers in Colorado or Catholic Peace Ministries in Iowa," said ACLU associate legal director Ann Beeson.

"Do Americans really want to return to the days when peaceful critics become the subject of government investigations?" she said. The ACLU is America's most prominent independent advocacy group for civil liberties.

The FOIA requests seek FBI files on groups and individuals targeted for speaking out or practicing their faith.

The FBI denied using the task forces -- a key element of the government's efforts to prevent another terror attack like those on Sept. 11, 2001 -- to spy on innocent individuals.

Asked about the ACLU action, an FBI spokesman said, "The FBI does not investigate individuals or groups that are engaged in exercising their constitutional rights of freedom of expression.

He added, "Only if they are engaged in criminal activity in support of a cause would we be interested in them."

In its FOIA request, the ACLU asked for information on procedures used by the task forces for monitoring people based on their race, religious affiliation, organizational membership or participation in protest activities.

United Press International

ACLU seeks FOIA files on FBI spying

December 2, 2004

Chicago, IL, Dec. 2 (UPI) -- The American Civil Liberties Union and its surrogates nationwide are asking the FBI to reveal whether it has been spying on anti-war protesters and others.

The ACLU of Illinois and several activist groups, including the Quaker-founded American Friends Service Committee and the Council on Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, filed Freedom of Information Act requests with the FBI asking the agency to release surveillance files about the groups and individuals.

Undercover police officers attended meetings, rallies and fundraisers of at least five groups opposed to the war in Iraq, the Chicago Sun-Times said.

"We don't think the FBI should be wasting their time, and our tax dollars, tracking down the parents of student peace activists to question them, infiltrating groups who protect the environment or fight animal cruelty," an ACLU spokeswoman told National Public Radio.

The FBI reportedly questioned some people to prevent violence at the summer political conventions and has said that it only investigates illegal activity -- not free speech.



Police in FBI unit violate 'spy files' pact, ACLU says

By Sue Lindsay

December 2, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union contends that the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force is compiling its own "spy files" on peaceful protesters.

The ACLU charges that Denver police assigned to the unit are violating a 2003 agreement in which Denver promised to stop keeping files of surveillance information on individuals and groups who engage in peaceful political demonstrations.

Mark Silverstein, the ACLU's legal director, and activists will present evidence of the violations at a news conference this morning.

The settlement agreement applies to no other government agency, and the question of whether Denver police officers who serve on the terrorism task force are bound by its rules remains unresolved.

During his election campaign, Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and other candidates said that Denver rules against political monitoring would apply to all officers whether they are on the task force or not, Silverstein has said.

The ACLU sued the city in federal court in 2002 over the police surveillance files on political activists and organizations. The lawsuit contended that Denver police watched thousands of activities and protesters despite the fact that they never were implicated in criminal activity.

The files labeled as "criminal extremist" such organizations as the American Friends Service Committee.

Also in The Rocky Mountain News

ACLU accuses FBI of spying: Police say they're complying with law, battling terrorism

By Karen Abbott

December 3, 2004

Colorado's American Civil Liberties Union accused the FBI Thursday of spying on people who peacefully protest government policies and falsely labeling them "terrorists."

The civil liberties group filed a 24-page request with the local FBI on Thursday under the Freedom of Information of Act, seeking to learn what information the FBI has collected on 10 activist groups and six individuals.

The action is part of a nationwide ACLU effort to learn whether the FBI's more than 60 Joint Terrorism Task Forces are violating citizens' First Amendment rights - and if they are, to stop them.

Similar requests for information were filed by the ACLU in California, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, Oregon and Washington, D.C.

For more than an hour Thursday, Colorado ACLU Legal Director Mark Silverstein showed documents to reporters at a news conference that he said implicate the FBI in spying on citizens not suspected of a crime. The documents included e-mails, memos, lists, printouts of Web sites and meeting agendas.

Many of them, obtained during the ACLU's "spy files" lawsuit against the Denver Police Department that ended last year with a settlement barring police from collecting information about law-abiding people and groups, are on the ACLU's Web site at [www.aclu-co.org/news/press release/release_JTTFFOIArequest.htm](http://www.aclu-co.org/news/press%20release/release_JTTFFOIArequest.htm).

"It's this kind of evidence that prompts us to say that we have documentary evidence showing that the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Task Force are indeed collecting information about peaceful protesters and about the lawful, constitutionally protected activities of advocacy organizations," Silverstein said.

Denver Police Chief Gerry Whitman said he appreciates the ACLU's concerns.

"I'm confident that we are in compliance with all applicable laws and policies," he said, "and that the assignment of Denver detectives to the FBI is necessary to protect this city against domestic and international terrorist threats."

Denver FBI spokeswoman Monique Kelso said Thursday that officials at the agency would review all of the ACLU's evidence and respond as soon as possible.

Kelso said local and national FBI officials also would review the ACLU's requests for information.

Meanwhile, she said, the agency's policy is that "the FBI does not investigate individuals or groups that are engaged in exercising their constitutional rights of freedom of expression.

"We only investigate those who are engaged in criminal activity."

But Silverstein showed reporters a list of vehicles, license plate numbers and the names connected with them, collected by Colorado Springs police during an environmental protest at a timber industry meeting at the Broadmoor Hotel in 2002.

Tom Fisher, a Denver police officer who works full time on the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force and is supervised by the FBI, asked Colorado Springs police to fax the list to him, according to the fax cover sheet that Silverstein showed reporters.

"People were making speeches and trying to speak to the delegates at the conference, and there was a banner hanging," said Kristin Atkins, of Crested Butte, an environmental activist who attended the protest. "Hardly a terrorist activity."

The list of vehicles indicated that officers followed Atkins three blocks to her car to note its license plate number.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects the rights to freedom of speech, press, religion, peaceful assembly and to petition the government for redress of grievances - common activities of protesters and others who disagree with government policies.

Carolyn Bninski of the Boulder-based Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center, one of the organizations for which the ACLU is requesting information from the FBI, said government infringement on First Amendment rights is dangerous to democracy.

"It has impacts not only for activists, but for all members of society," she said.

David Crawford, executive director of Rocky Mountain Animal Defense, said his group works nonviolently, mostly through such educational activities as speaking in schools and holding vigils. Its leaders and supporters include members of the clergy, veterinarians, teachers, attorneys and business people.

"Hardly the stuff of which criminal extremism is made," Crawford said.

"Criminal extremist organization," according to documents disclosed during the ACLU's "spy files" case against Denver, was a label applied to several peaceful groups by Denver police - including the American Friends Service Committee, founded by the Quakers in 1917 and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

Crawford said his organization's activities have been under obvious surveillance for years. "We see people in dark corners, in shadows, shooting photographs of us," he said. "We try to shoot photographs back."

Silverstein showed reporters an FBI message to local police about the tactics of protesters, including a warning that they might videotape police officers as an "intimidation" technique.

The Colorado ACLU also wants to know whether Denver police officers assigned to the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force still are compiling information about peaceful activists and groups despite last year's "spy files" settlement. Silverstein said the ACLU has no documentary evidence that they are but fears they may be.

The list

Organizations on whose behalf the ACLU has filed a request for information from the FBI

- American Friends Service Committee, founded by Quakers in 1917 to carry out service, development, social justice and peace programs
- American Indian Movement of Colorado
- Ancient Forest Rescue
- Campaign for Labor Rights
- Chiapas Coalition, a Denver-based organization supporting human rights in the Mexican state of Chiapas
- The Human Bean Company
- Citizens for Peace in Space
- Colorado Campaign for Middle East Peace
- Creative Resistance
- Dandelion Center
- Denver CopWatch
- Denver Justice and Peace Committee
- End the Politics of Cruelty

- Rocky Mountain Animal Defense
- Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center
- Transform Columbus Day, an alliance working to end official celebrations of Columbus Day

Source: Aclu

American Civil Liberties Union concerns

Here are some of the activities the ACLU says show that the FBI is compiling "spy files" on peaceful protesters:

- Taking down license plate numbers: A two-page fax listing vehicles, license plate numbers and names of participants in a nonviolent environmental protest at a lumber industry meeting at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs in 2002 were sent by Colorado Springs police to Tom Fisher, a member of the Denver FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, at Fisher's request.
- Monitoring peaceful demonstrations: A JTTF agent and two Denver Intelligence Unit members monitored two peaceful demonstrations protesting the bombing of Serbia. At another rally, detectives followed one participant to her car three blocks away to identify her through her license number.
- Intercepting e-mails: Five electronic messages sent by political activists to members and supporters of activist groups about upcoming activities such as a rally about Palestine, an animal rights protest and an announcement by a movement to end the official celebration of Oct. 12 as Columbus Day were obtained electronically by law enforcement officers and forwarded to the FBI.
- Trading intelligence: Documents indicate that intelligence officers from at least two dozen Colorado law enforcement agencies trade political intelligence information at bimonthly meetings of the Multi-Agency Group Intelligence Conference. Documents from the group state that meetings are "limited to sharing of information on extremist groups," but agendas list discussions of peaceful protesters and law-abiding organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee and Amnesty International. The ACLU wants to know if the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force agents also take part.



ACLU: Coloradans monitored by FBI at lawful protests

By Alicia Caldwell

December 2, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado is poised to accuse the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force of documenting the activities of Coloradans engaged in lawful demonstrations.

The organization will hold a news conference today in Denver to present what it says is evidence that the task force has conducted surveillance of people who were peacefully expressing their opinions on war, environmental issues, animal rights and labor rights - topics that have no connection to terrorism.

Mark Silverstein, legal director for the ACLU in Colorado, declined to provide specifics Wednesday, saying he would disclose that information today.

However, the ACLU in Washington, D.C., provided a list of examples, including the Denver Police Department's monitoring of the Quaker-affiliated American Friends Service Committee, which was listed as an "active case" by a local terrorism task force.

Others contending they were improperly monitored or investigated include Rocky Mountain Animal Defense, the Washington-based Campaign for Labor Rights and a number of peace and environmental activists.

Monique Kelso, spokeswoman for the FBI in Denver, said Wednesday that her agency would not respond until specifics were provided.

"We're not going to comment on anything until we see what they say," Kelso said.

But an FBI spokesman in Washington denied singling out individuals or groups for surveillance or investigation based solely on activities protected by the Constitution's guarantees of free speech.

Officials say agents adhere strictly to Justice Department guidelines requiring evidence of criminal activity or indications that a person may know something about a crime.

"Any investigation conducted by the FBI is done under the attorney general's guidelines and in full compliance with the guidelines," said FBI spokesman Bill Carter.

The issue resonates in Denver, where a 2002 "spy files" lawsuit shined a spotlight on the Denver Police Department's practice of collecting information on people engaged in lawful activity.

In a settlement of the case last year, Denver agreed to keep files on people only where there was a reasonable suspicion that they were involved in criminal activity. And the city and county of Denver agreed to pay about \$469,000 in attorneys' fees and other legal costs as part of the settlement.

There are terrorism task forces in 100 cities with more than 3,700 members, including at least 2,000 FBI agents, state and local police, and other federal law-enforcement officials. More than half of the task forces were formed after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Also in the Denver Post

FBI spying allegations supported by records

By Alicia Caldwell

December 3, 2004

Officials with the American Civil Liberties Union accused the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force on Thursday of collecting e-mails and license-plate numbers from peaceful activists labeled as terrorists.

The ACLU disclosed documents that it says show the terrorism task force is spying on people who are politically active in environmental, political and animal-rights issues.

In one instance, Colorado Springs police collected license-plate numbers of those at a peaceful protest against the timber industry and sent them to a Denver police detective on the Joint Terrorism Task Force, the ACLU said.

In another, the ACLU said, task-force members obtained e-mails from activists planning peaceful activities on animal-rights issues and a Palestinian rally, as well as a schedule for Columbus Day protests.

"These kind of actions on the part of the FBI are very dangerous in a democracy," Mark Silverstein, legal director for the ACLU in Colorado, said at a Denver news conference.

An FBI spokesman said Thursday that the agency sees a difference between political and criminal activity.

"We don't investigate peaceful demonstrators," said Joe Parris, an FBI spokesman in Washington. "We don't investigate people exercising their First Amendment rights. We investigate criminal activity."

Colorado ACLU officials said they sent a Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI, one of a dozen such requests announced by ACLU chapters around the country. The local group is seeking records from January 1998 to the present that the terrorism panel collected on 16 organizations and 10 people.

Monique Kelso, spokeswoman for the Denver FBI, said her office had not received the request by Thursday afternoon but that when it did, the FBI would follow established procedure to release information.

The ACLU's 24-page request, which the group posted on its website, says the FBI has labeled nonviolent protesters as members of terrorist organizations in a computerized database called the Violent Gang and Terrorist Organization File.

William Sulzman, whom Silverstein described as a former Catholic priest with a history of peaceful anti-war activities, was arrested in 2002.

As he sat in a patrol car, he heard a police radio report saying the FBI had labeled him a member of a terrorist organization. Silverstein said he suspects Sulzman was listed in the gang-and-terrorist database.

Much of the information that Silverstein used to shape his information request came out of the Denver "spy files" case in which the ACLU filed a lawsuit claiming the Denver Police Department unlawfully kept intelligence files on people and organizations involved in legal, peaceful protest.

Also in the Denver Post

Terror cops should focus on real deal

By Jim Spencer

December 3, 2004

Here's what's wrong with America's war on terrorism:

We can't find Osama bin Laden. But we know what kind of car Kirsten Atkins drives.

We can't crack an al-Qaeda cell. But we're all over Quaker demonstrators.

On Thursday, the American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado and other ACLU chapters asked FBI-run anti-terrorism task forces across the country to turn over information gathered on non-violent political groups and individual activists.

Now, it's time for average Americans to make a request of those assigned to protect us from domestic terror.

Get real.

I understand personally the need for joint terrorism task forces. They let local, state and federal law enforcement work together to avoid attacks like 9/11. In 2002, a Virginia task force discovered and took care of a neo-Nazi's threat against me.

I am thankful they were on top of it.

I'm less grateful for the attention paid to folks like Atkins. She hasn't threatened anybody. Casting her as a terrorist makes no one safer.

The 39-year-old Crested Butte woman isn't hiding. She says she doesn't own a gun. She has no history of violence.

"I love my country," she said. "I love the land."

Atkins belongs to an environmental group called Ancient Forest Rescue. The organization cares about protecting trees. Atkins said she was once arrested for trespassing during a protest, but like her organization, Atkins decries violence and vandalism in any form.

Kirsten Atkins is a tree-hugger.

The ACLU says she is also a person of interest to Denver's Joint Terrorism Task Force. Mark Silverstein, Colorado's ACLU legal director, said Atkins' name came to the terrorism task force via the Colorado Springs Police Department, which ran license plates of people participating in a 2002 protest.

Thing is, Atkins' suspected sedition never involved terrorism. She was demonstrating against the North American Wholesale Lumber Association.

Silverstein cited nine other activists and 16 non-violent organizations that the ACLU "strongly suspects" have been targeted for anti-terrorism government surveillance.

Besides Atkins, they are people like Sarah Bardwell. An intern for the Nobel Peace Prize-winning American Friends Service Committee, Bardwell found four terrorism task force agents and some SWAT-gearred Denver cops at her door last July. They brought pictures of young anti-war and social justice protesters. Uncle Sam wanted to make sure these

conscience-driven types committed no crimes at the Democratic and Republican conventions.

This kind of overkill is what the ACLU hopes to expose with its request for FBI documents.

Among the groups apparently being looked at is Denver CopWatch, which uses nonviolent means to increase police accountability. The ACLU says a 2002 Denver police intelligence report called "JTTF (Joint Terrorism Task Force) Active Case List" included CopWatch.

CopWatch's most controversial tactic is telling citizens to videotape or photograph police who use excessive force.

"We once made up a song about a police captain to the tune of 'Macarena'" said Denver CopWatch founder Steve Nash, who played an active role in Denver's current police reform. "That's about as mean as we get."

Added Silverstein: "We're talking about groups and people who are either completely lawful or peaceful in their civil disobedience. When I think of domestic terrorism, I think of blowing up the federal building in Oklahoma City."

So do the vast majority of Americans.

So should the people charged with protecting them.

Members of this country's anti-terrorism task forces do important work. But they guard America best by focusing on people who break bones, not those who hurt feelings.



Prying Into FBI Activities

By Ryan Singel

December 2, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union and its affiliates filed a flotilla of Freedom of Information Act requests Thursday, seeking proof of widespread government surveillance of activists by the nation's local anti-terrorism units.

The requests were filed in 10 states and the District of Columbia on behalf of political advocacy groups, including the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and ask for any surveillance files compiled by local anti-terrorism investigative groups.

Denver police, who were banned from spying on nonviolent groups such as the Quakers after the ACLU caught the agency compiling and hiding dossiers in 2002, also used the Joint Terrorism Task Force to bypass the spy ban, according to the same document.

The ACLU's comprehensive request to the FBI's central office also seeks to learn how surveillance data is shared, how the task forces determine whom to target, the name of every deputized agent and the number of college campuses the task forces have visited.

The FBI did not immediately return a call for comment.

The FBI's and CIA's ability to keep tabs on American citizens was sharply curtailed in the 1970s, following revelations about the FBI's and CIA's widespread intelligence gathering and wiretaps of political groups and influential figures such as Martin Luther King Jr.

Many of those barriers have been relaxed or dismantled since Sept. 11, 2001, but FBI guidelines still prohibit the government from maintaining files on individuals solely for the purpose of monitoring First Amendment activities.



Associated Press



Oregon ACLU joins national effort on alleged FBI spying

By William McCall

December 2, 2004

PORTLAND, Ore. - The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon on Thursday joined other ACLU chapters around the nation to file Freedom of Information Act requests with the FBI to determine whether the agency is spying on political and religious groups.

The ACLU said there is evidence the FBI and police are illegally spying on political, environmental and faith-based groups elsewhere in the country.

"It is now beyond dispute that the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces have been used to systematically spy on the lawful political and religious activities of individuals and organizations," said Oregon ACLU Executive Director David Fidanque.

"Unfortunately, most of this activity has occurred under a cloak of secrecy so we don't know how much of it is occurring in Oregon," Fidanque said.

Calls to the FBI office in Portland were not immediately returned. But a spokesman at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., said all investigations are done under strict guidelines to ensure no individual or group is singled out.

The Oregon request is one of nearly a dozen FOIA requests filed around the country today by the national ACLU and its chapters seeking information about FBI and police surveillance.

All the requests seek FBI files to determine whether groups and individuals were targeted for speaking out or practicing their faith. In addition, the ACLU has filed a separate national request seeking information about the practices and funding structure of the FBI joint task forces.

"The FBI is wasting its time and our tax dollars spying on groups that criticize the government, like the Quakers in Colorado or Catholic Peace Ministries in Iowa," said ACLU associate legal director Ann Beeson. "Do Americans really want to return to the days when peaceful critics become the subject of government investigations?"

Fidanque noted that Oregon law prohibits state and local police from collecting or maintaining files on the political, religious or social activities of individuals or organizations unless there is evidence of criminal activity.

Among the organizations included in the Oregon ACLU request are Portland Peace and Justice Works, the Portland Peaceful Response Coalition, the Oregon Wildlife Federation, the American Friends Service Committee, In Defense of Animals, the Islamic Center of Portland and the ACLU of Oregon itself.

"The public has a right to know whether the types of abuses we've seen elsewhere are also happening in Oregon," Fidanque said.



Associated Press



ACLU, others seek a peek at FBI surveillance files

By Herbert McCann

December 2, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, with several local activist groups, is seeking information from the FBI and local police on the extent of the surveillance of the groups' activities.

ACLU legal director Harvey Grossman said the groups filed Freedom of Information Act requests on Thursday with the FBI to find out why the surveillance by task forces set up to combat terrorism also targeted anti-war and Islamic groups. The civil liberties organization wants to know who has been interviewed, investigated or subjected to searches by the task forces, and how the task forces are funded.

The filing by the ACLU and local activists group mirrors similar actions taken in several cities across the nation on Thursday.

"The FBI's response to these requests in Chicago and across the nation will provide an outline of how widespread the practice of conducting surveillance on peaceful religious and political organizations has been over the past few years," Grossman said.

The FBI is denying it has singled out individuals or groups for surveillance or investigation based solely on activities protected by the Constitution. FBI spokesman Bill Carter said agents are adhering to Justice Department guidelines requiring evidence of criminal activity or indications that a person may know something about a crime.

Michael McConnell, regional director of the American Friends Service Committee, said since the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., spying on political and religious meetings has increased. He claims undercover Chicago police, working with a terrorism task force, infiltrated protest groups in 2002 because of fears they'd disrupt a meeting of the Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue, a group of international business leaders. The officers attended rallies and fund-raisers of the American Friends Service Committee and four other anti-war groups.

McConnell said his organization wants to know if the FBI is keeping "spy files" on the group's activities, and if the spying continues.

"Do Americans really want to return to a time when anyone critical of government police was subjected to this sort of intrusive surveillance?" he said.

Chicago Police spokesman David Bayless said Thursday the department was doing what is allowed under the law, which is investigate groups that could threaten the safety of the general public.

"Our legal activity was merely to ascertain if there was a threat to the public," he said, adding that he is not sure if that determination was made of the Quaker group. "We are trying to determine if that information was turned over to the federal government."

The American Friends Service Committee has been the target of government spying since the 1950s, when an FBI file identified a leader as a "communist sympathizer," according to McConnell. The group, founded in 1917 to help conscientious objectors to World War I, was one of several that won a court order in 1982 barring the Chicago Police "Red Squad" from spying on groups that were conducting legal protests.

The federal court lifted the ban in 2001, saying it hampered law enforcement efforts to protect the public.

Attorney Zubair Khan of the Muslim Bar Association said Muslims are being targeted for surveillance by law enforcement and it is putting a chill on the practice of their Islamic faith.

"It simply is inadequate to target persons on the basis of their political viewpoints or their religious affiliation," Kahn said.

Grossman said the ACLU has asked the FBI to expedite the release of the information, adding that if the agency does not respond within the amount of time required by law, the organization will file a federal lawsuit.



ACLU says FBI spied on activists, Muslims: Group seeks files from government on surveillance

By Tom Rybarczyk

December 3, 2004

The American Civil Liberties Union on Thursday took legal action to get documents the group says show the FBI, with the help of local authorities that include Chicago police, is spying on faith-based and activist organizations.

The ACLU's Illinois chapter filed Freedom of Information Act requests on behalf of several Muslim and peace-activist organizations to see their FBI files.

The ACLU and the groups are also asking for information about the National Joint Terrorism Task Force, which has a local branch in each major American city. The Chicago task force is made up of law-enforcement agencies, including the FBI's Chicago office and the Illinois State Police.

"Give up the files. Tell us what you are doing," said Harvey Grossman, director of ACLU's Illinois chapter. "We don't know how the FBI is operating."

Nationally on Thursday, the ACLU filed requests for information in nine other states and Washington, D.C., to find out more on how, Grossman said, the FBI is "wasting our tax dollars."

Officials from the FBI and Chicago police said Thursday they follow the law when it comes to surveillance.

"The FBI has no interest in investigating individuals who are engaged in their exercise of their constitutional rights," FBI spokesman Bill Carter said. "It's our job to investigate terrorism."

Carter declined to comment on the information request, saying his office had not received it yet.

The FBI posted a description on its Web site Wednesday of what the joint terrorism task forces do and how they operate. The task forces exist in 100 cities worldwide and employ 2,196 agents and 838 local law-enforcement officers, according to the Web site.

But at a news conference Thursday to announce the information request, several representatives of faith-based groups gave a different account of what the FBI and the

task forces do. Leaders from Muslim organizations told stories of FBI agents showing up at people's homes late at night or at their jobs to interview and harass them. These individuals did nothing wrong--they were just Muslim, the leaders said.

In one case, a college student came in tears to Seema Imam, vice president of the Muslim Civil Rights Center in Hickory Hills, after being told she needed to meet with a federal agent at Dunkin' Donuts the next morning. Imam said she has known the woman for years, and the woman never showed a reason for Imam to believe she was linked to terrorism.

Other stories include Chicago police officers infiltrating local activist group meetings, including one held by the American Friends Service Committee. Mary Zerkel, a director at the committee, was shocked to find an undercover officer had attended protest-planning meetings for the Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue in October 2002.

Zerkel found out about the officer's surveillance this year from an audit of police activities the department issued.

She said one of the meetings under surveillance was held at Agape House, a campus ministry at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the crowd of 20 people were labor union officials, members of an anarchist group and Zerkel's then 7-month-old baby girl Zelda, she said.

"I think it's really ironic. We were very clearly trying to do everything by the book," Zerkel said.